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The Virus as a Straightening Device

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"Could you give an example of a 'straightening device?'", I was asked recently. Sara Ahmed (2006, 107) brings in this term in order to explain how heteronormativity is the effect of orienting bodies in space. It is through repeated practices of arranging bodies in relation to objects and each other that the family tree made of vertical (blood ties) and horizontal (spouses and siblings) lines becomes privileged: "The 'hope' of the family tree (…) is that the vertical line will produce a horizontal line, from which further vertical lines will be drawn" (ibid., 83). It didn't take me long to come up with an example: the virus – the figure of the virus as it is deployed in politics. Thanks to the virus, combined with a beautiful spring, home-office and home-schooling, we were witnessing in Berlin how a certain species has begun to dominate public space: the nuclear family, and in a rare type that is usually limited to media images or holiday times, two adults engaging with a small group of children, preferably marked as their offspring through attire or habit.

Of course, it is not the virus per se. So, what are the *applications* that make the virus function as a straightening *device*? Two particular ones secure its role: One called 'the household,' the other 'subsidies.' In March, Berlin's city politics installed epidemic measures that did not prevent people from going out, but carefully regulated how its populations made use of public spaces, streets, and parks. Fresh air and exercise were promoted, and those who were not immediately concerned with medical or economic survival found themselves spending much time outside – at first under the pretext of exercising, then later simply enjoying the sun, or transferring improvised home-offices or classrooms outdoors.

Starting with a members-of-one-household rule, it was from the very beginning that the nuclear family fitting into this definition was allowed to ignore the 1.5 m distancing in social contact. Since nurseries, schools, and playgrounds were closed, kids circulating around mostly two grown-ups took over the streets. The Child, as introduced by Lee Edelman (2004) is the figure of what he calls "reproductive futurism," the promise of a better future through reproduction, presumably available without the unpredictability of doing politics. In regular times, reproductive futurism projects onto the Child the subject's "dream of eventual self-realization" (ibid., 10). In Corona times, one finds an entanglement of reproductive and epidemic futurism: the Child becoming the icon of the survival of the family line.

The second application of subsidies joins in with the household. The vertical is not only the bloodline, but also the line of inheritance – a straight, often gendered channel along which wealth is handed on in predictable ways. Thus, questioning heteronormativity would also demand that we rework this channel. A simple solution would consist in abolishing private property. Since this is rather improbable, a possible answer lies in reforming inheritance and tax law, so that wealth could easily

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be handed on to friends and chosen kin or distributed widely along self-defined criteria – turning a straight line into dispersing paths or a meandering slope. Yet, state politics instead creates a match of familial and financial measures. Subsidies are directed towards small and middle-sized business owners who, no surprise, are often called 'family businesses,' and freelancers in the digital industries. In short, to those who, when sent into home-office, are willing to teach their children the virtues of capitalist life. Subsidies turn profitable, when invested in future generations rather than consumed.

How to escape futurism, this powerful edifice of mostly unconscious ideas and habits that turns hope into a legitimization of social and global inequalities and weds privatization and necropolitics? While Edelman's focus is on provocatively refraining from any kind of future, Donna Haraway (2016) promotes sympoietic sociality. According to her political vision, condensed in the formula "make kin, not babies," the role of kids would change from being the screen of projection of futuristic hope or an investment of family wealth to critters who, in lining-up with endangered species would grow into response-ability for the survival of the planet as a livable place, where all lives matter, where species meet and flourish together, and "practice the arts of living and dying well" (ibid., 98), and are equally mourned. Not *the* Child and its distinguished privilege or discrimination, depending on ideologies of superiority and practices of necropolitics, but children in all their varieties and singularity.

"Dying well" is an ideal far from being met in the current times of Covid-19, characterized by a universal precariousness that plays out in brutal ways as highly differentiated precarity. Accordingly, the politics of care and kin should provide space for "oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family" (ibid., 2). The future lies in installing radically new forms of cohabitation. In this vein, questions are: What do we learn from the virus, from the humility it demands, from the break-down it imposes on illusory sovereignty? How can this help us to imagine forms of economic and political governance, as well as epistemic and cultural knowledge production that cherish the otherness of others and oneself?

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